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# The Astronaut and the Sorceress



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## Chapter 1 by Alessandro Nunes

After a month, I was going crazy. The same stone walls every day, the same food. The same view from the window where I can see the other prison towers, with no sign of a living being.

If you are reading this, unknown prisoner, feel sorry for you. Written with blood I leave you my story, the last one you could expect to earn in this life.

The ship, the dog, the Sentinel, the sorceress. This story is more about her than mine.

## Chapter 2 by Glendo



I could tell it was her story the moment I first laid eyes on her. An air of obscurity masked her being, and an untameable wisdom danced like a fire in her eyes. That was on the first day since I got here. I was sane back then. We all were...

It was my duty to look after this place: to some a sanctuary, to others a prison. A grey-walled, uninteresting block of boredom slapped in the middle of an uninhabited planet. My job? To keep the prisoners in check. Though there were others to help in this menial task, there was granted to me no escape from loneliness. Even as the spacecraft dropped me off here, I could tell already that the lack of entertainment would be my death.

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Then, of course, I saw the sorceress. As the ship landed, the startling news arrived harshly in my communication. The ship was not a prison, it was a sanctuary.

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Our crew of ten had now become nine.

### Chapter 3 by intellikat



We stood over the lifeless body of Germayne. No one said a word. The Captain tuend angrily and stalked toward the grey building, the first mate following crisply on his heels. I looked at the others and did the same.

The Captain jerked a plasma-rifle roughly from the armoury wall. The first mate was counting out plasma cells on the table before us. It was still silent among the crew, but we all knew what was ahead.

"The locals," spoke the Captain. "I want you to question every goddamn one of them. And I want you in pairs. Start with the support staff and work your way up to the Sorceress herself. We're back here in three hours to share what we find."

"Sir. About the protocol--"

"Gopddamn the protocol. Germayne's lying dead, with a piece of steel buried in his chest. You want that on your hands when the transport returns?"

We made our way, as he had instructed, through the barren surrounds of the ancient stone facility that had become prison to galactic criminals of all sorts. There was nothing at first, and we believed them-- the locals were simple, with lower functioning systems that made deception difficult. And yet we all sensed that something wasn't quite right.

Burke sat with my on a low stone wall as the twin suns descended and an evening chill cut through the thin atmosphere. I rotated the thermo-coupling on the neckcuff of my suit and spoke.

"Fucking planet. It's a test, you know. This mess we're in."

"How so?"

"This is a game. To drive us crazy. I don't believe it for an instant. We've all been pinged. Selected, for some reason. Insulted. And then we're told to follow corporate policy. They've assigned us here to finish us off."

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"Men?"

We stood to attention as the Captain approached.

"There's only one local left to query. The Sorceress." He motioned to me. "We go."

As the two of us ascended the curving stairway leading to her sanctuary, I had the uneasy feeling we were walking into a trap. There was something more to this Sorceress than we had been told. Her sorcery was certainly to extend beyond healing and intuitive abilities that were to aid us in our prison-keeping task... and I was about to find out to what extent.

#### Chapter 4 by Andro1d



The door was made of steel and felt like a hundred pounds when I pushed it open. I followed the Captain, and he motioned to stay quiet.

The room was littered with books and scrolls. Symbols were engraved on the walls; not a single square inch was left untouched by the strange heiroglyphs. A fire kept the room mildly lit and warm.

She was waiting for us on her bed. We readied our weapons, but when she stood everything stopped. Our fear, thoughts, emotions, hunger, and thirst disappeared the instant our eyes met hers.

"I am your servant! I am your slave!" I tossed myself at her feet. "Please take me! I am yours forever!"

The Captain kneeled as I did and wished for the same.

The sorceress smiled. A smile so sweet that I melted to my core. "I accept your kind offer." She walked past us and picked up a scroll. "You two belong to me now. Rise my pets. We have work to do."

We rose and followed our beautiful sorceress out the door.

Chapter 5 by Glenda

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I couldn't accept this fate. The Sorceress's words and her objectives were at best unclear, but a part of me knew that I had to choose to do.

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"What is our task, mistress?" The Captain asked. In complete submission to her will.

"Have you ever heard of the Sentinel?" She stopped, as we did, and checked our faces for any sign of recognition. After seeing not even a hint of it, she continued. "It was a machine taken to this planet to act as a guardian. I was here when it was functional, when this world offered more than grey.

"But now, that very same guardian has abused its responsibilities. It now roams the barren desert not far from here, destroying all it finds. Except for one thing: a ship encased in sand that has made its resting place there."

A frown beset itself upon the Captain's eyebrows, the little thought he was licensed by the Sorceress to have making its way to his mouth:

"That was Germaine's post, wasn't it? The wasteland outside of the complex. So he wasn't killed by an inhabitant here-"

"-but instead by a rogue AI. I believe that was his fate, yes," The Sorceress finished.

"So you want us to destroy this Sentinel?" I questioned, with a rumour of resistance in my voice. Her grip over my mind was loosening, I was sure of it.

"Yes." She began to continue her descent from her chamber, and the Captain followed at her heels. I loitered for a second or two, but once again suddenly ensnared by a controlling force, I was soon behind them.

After all, this wasn't my story. It was hers. All of it. We were merely puppets setting the stage...

## Chapter 6 by StanG



"So you want us to destroy this Sentinel?" echoed faintly in my core.

I turned towards the whisper of sound to detect from which direction it had travelled and could make out, through the dusty desert haze, a darker line where the horizon greyed into the

heavy set walls of the prison we had all known on this dry planet. Even Log whimpered as though he had perceived the faintest of things, the language once known, but now forgotten.

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I must discover how serious the threat is, and how to neutralize it, as I had already done before, while my power supply remained strong. One day, probably sooner than the Makers

would have supposed, my core cells would dry up and end; but that day is not yet here and I must continue with the protection of my charge, given by the very Makers Themselves.

"Come, Dog, let us once again seek the grey and leave The Ship behind in the safety of the golden soil until our return."

After ensuring that The Ship was comfortable and would manage without us for a short time, we headed out towards the grey-walled prison to see what Destiny had in store for us there. Dog padded along in the scant shade offered by my hulk, but seemed content to stay at my side. I would find a real treat for him later, when time allowed.

When we had covered only one third of the distance to our goal, the echo of the same voice as before resounded within my core again, like the mantra of a dead soul, seeking blessed deliverance from the grey.

"So you want us to destroy this Sentinel?" seemed to hit my nucleus and bounce around my multi-cores, quivering with a strange sensation, as though excited or nervous. Is it possible to destroy me? I wondered within. The kernel hidden away in my core from the Makers told a different, safer story; one of perpetual, limitless existence without fear of ending.

I am the Sentinel. I cannot end. I cannot be destroyed. I have been since time immemorial. I will be until time ends. Who is the creature who thinks the possibility exists to remove me?

A name rises from within a distant, fiery furnace - a memory now cooled from many revolutions past. A Sorceress - no, THE Sorceress. Could this be the long-forgotten voice of my First Maker? And yet, the memory would not consolidate into fact and the voice did not fit, something about it was wrong.

I must find the source of this memory. If it is my First Maker, I will report all I have seen and accomplished since being set my task, here on this planet.

As my air conditioner continued to whirr heat back into the wavering desert environment

keeping my multi-cores within their proper operative temperature, I continued on towards the origin of the strange question that had begun my circuits.

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Surely, the owner of this voice must know that it was impossible to destroy me? "So you want us to destroy this Sentinel?" Surely, the owner of this v- wait. Have I not just had this thought?

Something was happening to my circuitry. This could not be possible. Dog whined sadly. What is the matter, Dog? I will find a real treat for you, do not worry. Worry? What does this word mean? Worry. Care. Disquiet. Distress. Problem. Prob-lem. P-rob-lem. Something was out of order - disquieting, distressing. Worrying.

"So you want us to destroy this Sentinel?" The repetition of this phrase puzzled me. What? How? "So you want us to destroy-" Why would the voice not cease? It echoed, reverberated, resounded within my cores, making it impossible to think beyond the moment. "So you want us to destr-" be quiet. I must turn off inner sensors, bypass circuits, open diodes, close switches, remove cells, change the flow of electrons until... until... I know not.

"So you want us to destroy this Sentinel?" I questioned, with a rumour of resistance in my voice. Her grip over my mind was loosening, I was sure of it.

"Yes." She began, smiling enigmatically. "It has already begun."

## Chapter 7 by StanG



Lights flickered and brightened. The cockpit awoke slowly, as though from the deepest sleep; stretching monitors winked at silent, black chairs while scanners, dimly red and green followed two blips across the desert ahead.

The largest of the two blips strode confidently while the smaller trotted along beside it - the Sentinel and Dog were headed towards the grey-walled buildings on the horizon.

Ship remained calm, warm beneath the golden sands that had held her entrenched for so long, safely providing shelter against all the sandstorms and biting winds that had ravaged this place continually since her arrival here. Wondering briefly what had prompted the Sentinel and Dog to leave her alone in this terrible place, Ship reminisced about that first day when she had felt

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The MO began by finding and reading as much literature as she could from Ship's data banks, while eating from the well-stocked kitchen supplies that would now belong only to her. As she absorbed herself in the data discs which contained the combined knowledge of all her people, localised storms grew stronger over several months, covering most of Ship's body in sand drifts, meaning it would take quite an effort to dig her out and leave this place in the future.

The day dawned when the MO packed bags, boxes and cases and ordered the Sentinel to construct a cart to carry them and accompany her to the sombre horizon where Ship's records showed there to be an immense building complex surrounded by a high wall, which had been observed briefly on atmospheric entry.

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"I'm not too good with names. So from now on, you'll be 'Dog' and you, my huge friend can be, hmm, 'Sentinel', because you're big, powerful and silent. Now, shall we see what the indigenous natives look like?" Charity Wright asked as she prepared for the long trek out to the grey superstructure she had seen on the monitor during their terrifying descent to the dusty earth they now walked. "Maybe we'll find somebody to help us get our ship working again, you never know."

This planet was in the data banks as uninhabited. But who could have known that some alien populace had built this huge structure here, hidden in the grey? Charity wondered if the unlimited wisdom she had gleaned from the ship's data discs of all that her people had learned would help her now, in a place that may well have entirely different rules and laws of physics.

"Well," she chuckled to nobody at all, "there's only one way to find out."

Picking up a staff she had fashioned from the singular piece of wooden material she had discovered in this blighted place, she set off at a happily brisk pace towards the grey.

## Chapter 8 by StanG



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surrounding area for any more of the planet dwellers and finding the locale clear, Ship wondered briefly what might have happened to the MO, the Sentinel and Dog, before returning to her standby mode.

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As Charity, the Sentinel and Dog neared the massive grey walls of the huge fortification in the sea of sandy rocks and boulders, several hundred creatures of approximately 1.5 metres tall surrounding the massive stone gates which scarred the walls chattered and screeched as they closed in on the unwelcome visitors. Each of them held, in talon-like hands, long poles which had either sharpened tips or slings attached as weapons.

Several of the creatures, encouraged by an enigmatic, tall figure in a familiar looking spacesuit, approached Charity's position with angry shouts and threatening gestures and as they advanced closer, Charity motioned to the Sentinel while quietly issuing a command. When the first of the small creatures reached within 30 metres, Charity held her staff aloft and called out her command in a loud voice, which all would hear. Upon hearing the order, Sentinel, who had positioned itself behind Charity, then fired an intense bolt from its welding torch in the direction of the advancing populace, setting alight the forerunners and causing a mad panic among the rest, who retreated as quickly as possible towards the citadel.

Seeing the result of her planned introduction to the local populace, Charity headed towards the great gates of the structure, striding confidently between the crouching, cowering inhabitants while holding her staff high enough that all could clearly see it. Murmurs of "Sorcery!" and "Sorceress!" created the suggestion of gently breaching waves on a wide waterfront.

Charity decided that her new title of "Sorceress" fit well and would be a fine beginning to a new life on a strange planet.

As she approached the tall figure she recognised from an age ago, she asked, "So, pilot. How have you been since leaving me to fend for myself for the last several months? Did the natives

find you likeable enough?"

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"Fend for yourself? Come on, Charity. It's not like I was leaving you to hunt and kill your own food. The kitchen stores were full. I had a few drinks and a few of the natives' imaginary drink and all of our planet's seed stores to grow more later. I wouldn't say I'd left you to 'fend for yourself'!"

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"No matter. Sentinel! Take our friend and make him comfortable in a safe and secure place where no harm will ever come to him."

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I'm not even sure of my sanity any more.

I can see the story of our arrival here, written in my own blood on a once-white wall with the nail I'd managed to pull out from the weak legs of the bed I'd lain on for far too long now. The Medical Officer gone crazy from the fear of being abandoned on a distant, unknown planet, whose people believed our technology held some 'magical' power, purely on the basis of her first encounter with them at the gate to this immense city. She had ruled them and controlled their development since that fateful day until she believed her own story, growing ever more tyrannical with every new believer added to her entourage. Any dissension had been met with swift retribution, including my own incarceration in her prison cells.

My story, the story of the pilot of a vessel sent to investigate strange radio wave readings from an obscure area of space in the sky outside of my world's atmosphere, a story that now would not be heard but I felt compelled to tell to you, unknown prisoner, has taken the last of my life's blood to pen...

...and who will ever remember the Astronaut pilot and his dog of the first and last Starship Deepspace Explorer which crashed onto a dry, dusty planet in the middle of nowhere?

the end

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